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Abstract

'I am "mongrel"- I am of two worlds in almost every way. It is a very lonely position ... you can never again belong totally to either of the cultures you grew up in. You will always remain an outsider' . While one is aware of a regard for identity in community living which is part of the 'faa-Samoa', Wendt does not accept the faa-Samoa as perfect.

DENIS HULSTON

A Note on Albert Wendt's *Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree*

the faa-Samoa is perfect they sd
from behind cocktail bars like pulpits
double scotch on the rocks, i sd.

(Albert Wendt)

'I am "mongrel" – I am of two worlds in almost every way. It is a very lonely position ... you can never again belong totally to either of the cultures you grew up in. You will always remain an outsider'.¹ While one is aware of a regard for identity in community living which is part of the 'faa-Samoa', Wendt does not accept the

faa-Samoa as perfect. It may be easy to adulate a traditional golden age in reaction against a less than satisfying modern palagified Samoa, but Wendt suggests that such a golden age never really existed. One can understand a nostalgia for tradition, for submergence in the traditional view would provide an analgesic to alienation. But such an acceptance is not only impossible in so far as there is no return to the past, it is also an unrealistic view of the past. Wendt's nostalgia is qualified with awareness that traditional is not and never was synonymous with perfection. This feeling is suggested most directly in the poetry. The same view informs the short stories and novels, but there is a shift in these to an emphasis on the corruption inherent in an adoption of the colonial view, and a concern with identity in existential terms.

What may have been worthwhile in the traditional world has been corrupted by the colonial papalagi world. 'The papalagi and his world has turned us ... and all the modern Samoans into cartoons of themselves, funny crying ridiculous shadows on the picture screen'.² Paovale Iosua in 'Declaration of Independence' is such a man. He has lost his soul and become a puppet of a colonial system. His pride in his success is hollow for he is nothing more than a clerk serving a system in which he has no real part.

The world of the papalagi is a sterile one. Powerful in conveying this is Wendt's use of sexual imagery. Pepesa's teacher, Mrs Brown is without children (the horse without the stallion as the children see it), the doctor in *Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree* 'knows the female biology from books only' (p. 105). In 'Virgin-wise' there is the conflict between sexuality and restrictive papalagi values; 'it sin lust after woman-meat; it sin to come so preacher say on Sunday', although the sexuality of the story teller is in itself an unreality (p. 147). Susanna, Pepesa's wife, and her parents use Susanna's sexuality to trap Pepesa into marriage; her lovemaking is motivated by economic and status gains. The marriage of the Trusts, the papalagi manager and his wife, is sterile, devoid of communication and open enjoyment of sexuality.

Wendt suggests that the Samoan, in adopting papalagi values as his own becomes a castrated man. In Paovale's thoughts his

father's challenge exposes the sterile sameness and servility of Paovale's existence.

you, my son, are a little man, a starched-clothed Government employee worthy only of \$60 a month ... you may have God, son, but you're a little man. A small man, weak even down there where a man should be able to stand up and fight valiantly. When was the last time you sharpened your weapon? Poor, son, just a pitifully shrivelled-up banana. (p. 89)

Sexuality is an assertion of identity, of manhood, but men such as Paovale have lost this assertion of self.

On the other hand Pili, the pint-sized devil, is his own man in that he refuses to be 'polite'. He is an outlaw in the sense that he lives 'his (own) law'. Pili, appropriately, is a man with a large and well used weapon. 'He was, like grandfather, a law unto himself, but unlike grandfather, a criminal, a complete outsider' (p. 41). He, like his grandfather, is not the Polynesian noble savage, but trained in the ways of his grandfather, he holds in contempt the effeminate papalagi values. Significantly he is a 'devil' in a pint-sized frame. Physically he is a dwarf, but his soul is unrestrained by the papalagi or Samoan values he rejects. He is a dwarf in so far as he is different and does not fit the mould of ordinary men. But his real manhood lies in his refusal to accept that restraining mould, his refusal to be other than himself; he is ultimately responsible only to himself.

This is the sort of identity which Wendt ultimately explores. There can be no true identity in either Samoan or Papalagi cultures. Ultimate identity is an existential acceptance of responsibility to self – an assertion of one's own individual integrity.

Tagata presents us with a powerful image of the existential man. He, too, is a dwarf physically, unfitting and deformed in the eyes of usual men. But it is the usual men who are dwarfs in spirit, while Tagata accepts responsibility for his own identity, his own destiny. He realises the absurdity of life. 'Life ... is ridiculous like a dwarf is ridiculous' (p. 141). Tagata can assert the goodness of life because he possesses the freedom inherent in an acceptance of the absurdity of life and in an acceptance of the inevitability and finality of death. It is Tagata's laughter in death which gives him

ultimate freedom; he acts as the 'eagle', true to self, asserting personal choice which makes meaning of absurdity, exercising man's ultimate personal choice ... the right to dispose of one's self.

'Pepesa, I am right there inside the death-goddess which no-one believes in anymore, and her sacred channel is all lava' (p. 141). Death is reality; the lava is implacable, it is the hard timeless reality to which Tagata returns for his strength; it is an ultimate truth or reality owing nothing to man.

The question of judgement is an important issue in this sense. Tagata and Pepesa are their own judges, judging the self by their own rules; ultimately this is the only real judgement – an integrity to self. This view makes a mockery of Pepesa's judgement at the hands of the 'black-dress' papalagi judge. The 'black-dress' judgement has no relevance, no meaning to Pepesa. 'I want to know who the Black dress is' (p. 128). Its judgement is alien to Pepesa, its values true only for itself. Yet neither does the judge's 'truth' hold for him. Without his wig he is human after all, naked and stumbling; the system of justice is a pretence like the clothing he puts on. Furthermore, Pepesa is not on trial for his crime against property. He is tried instead for his belief in himself ... the judge uses his own religious belief, which can only hold true for himself, as a yardstick by which to measure Pepesa's worth. Pepesa realises the absurdity inherent in the terms of the judgement – 'you were the one who told me who I am' (p. 131). The judge cannot and will not understand.

In two other stories Wendt explores the distinction between existential freedom and its corruption, anarchy. Captain Full, Strongest Man Alive, is a corruption of the free man, a parody of Tagata, Pepesa and Pili. His freedom is without integrity, an anarchic freedom not an existential freedom based on real awareness of man's predicament. So too in 'Virgin wise'; the story teller extols sexual freedom, but is himself a prisoner of sexual fantasy. He is unable to face and accept reality; sexuality here is not an assertion of life.

In drawing heavily on an existentialist framework in his assertion of identity, Wendt's writing goes beyond the concerns of the local. His stature as a writer lies in the fact that he writes of more

than the Samoan or third world predicament; his characters are representative of a broader perspective – the state of man. Perhaps man's growth (technologically and culturally) is inevitably toward a realisation of his alienation, a realisation submerged in earlier more 'primitive' cultures. Wendt's concern is with that alienation.

NOTES

1. Marjorie Crocombe, 'Samoa's Albert Wendt: Poet and Author' in *Mana Annual of Creative Writing* (Suva: South Pacific Creative Arts Society, 1973), pp. 45-7. (Interview)
2. Albert Wendt, *Flying-Fox in a Freedom Tree* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1974), p. 141. All further references are to this edition and will be included in the text.